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A guano island

Honduras wins secret CIA base

By Thomas B. Ross
Sun-Times Bureau

WASHINGTON — After a decade as a center of U.S. cloak-and-dagger activities, a tiny island of bird droppings in the Caribbean is about to be returned to Honduras.

Reliable diplomatic sources said presidential assistant Robert H. Finch will formally give up U.S. claim to the island during his one-day visit to Honduras Monday.

The island, Swan Island, about 100 miles north of Honduras, is composed entirely of guano, the accumulated droppings of sea fowl. It has served as the sight of a covert Central Intelligence Agency radio station broadcasting to Cuba during and after the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and later to other points in Latin America.

The sources indicated that final disposition of the station, and whether it will be used again by the CIA, will be subject to further negotiations.

Claimed in 1863

The United States has claimed the island since 1863 under the Guano Act of 1865 which gave the President the right to designate an unclaimed island as U.S. territory

once an American citizen had discovered guano on it.

The New York Guano Co. was first licensed to collect and sell the island's guano, a valuable fertilizer rich in phosphates. Later an Alabama sea captain and finally the United Fruit Co. set up operations on the island.

The commercial interests were followed by the Weather Bureau, the Federal Aviation Administration and eventually the CIA.

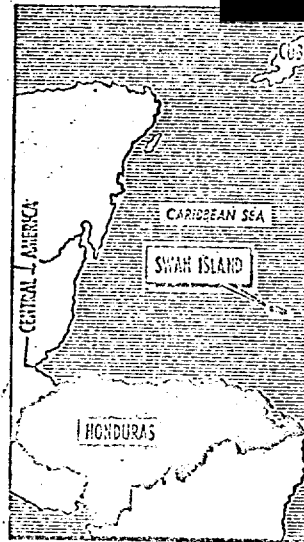
The CIA station originally operated as Radio Swan, which, in addition to political broadcasts, put out a variety of popular programs including one featuring a Cuban exile called Havana Rose.

'Hysterical parrots'

During the Bay of Pigs invasion, Radio Swan was on the air 24 hours a day, transmitting coded messages and mysterious orders to nonexistent battalions.

Havana Radio set up a counterbarrage, denouncing Radio Swan as "not a radio station but a cage of hysterical parrots."

After the invasion failed, the CIA station was renamed Radio Americas and continued



broadcasts to Cuba, Mexico, Central America and the upper tier of South America.

Shortly after the CIA established itself on Swan Island, a group of armed Honduran students sought to land on the island by force in 1960. They were repulsed singlehandedly by the weather bureau's cook but, after agreeing to lay down their arms, they were permitted to land, sing the Honduran national anthem and temporarily plant their flag.

Protest in UN

They were protesting the fact that a U.S. census had been taken on the island that year, recording a population of 28, down four since 1950.

A few months later Honduras protested in the United Nations, claiming that "Historically, geographically and juridically" the island belonged to it.

After 10 years of diplomatic bickering, the United States has now recognized Honduras' claim and Finch will make it all official in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, Monday.

Finch will be in Honduras for only a few hours, arriving in the morning from Brazil and leaving in the evening for Mexico. He will return here on Thanksgiving Day after an 11-day tour of Latin American countries.

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